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Chapter VII

e-Government Trust Providers

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If trust is a key value in e-commerce, it is much more so e-Government. This is because confidence is essential to the automated, blind relations with government permitted by the new technologies The function of trust providers is thus to create confidence. This chapter outlines the activities of a number of trust providers with reference to the regulation of the Internet, and the laws and institutions which engender trust in the democratic state.

TRUST, E-COMMERCE AND E-GOVERNMENT

Trust

Organized with the help of intermediaries such as Internet service providers who create and provide access to the necessary infrastructure, the spread of the Internet has opened up remote communications between different groups of people. This phenomenon has, in turn, highlighted the need for people and organizations capable of engendering sufficient confidence in relations and communications between Internet users. This is because our senses, together with knowledge and prejudices, are the primary channel generating trust in others and allowing us to expect a predictable response at each moment of the communication process. Thus, when unknown interlocutors enter the communications processes, which is inevitable in a medium such as the Internet, we need both to be aware of their presence and, of course, to place our trust in them.

In this light, it is clear that the creation of trust on the Internet deserves study, since trust is one of the basic motives underlying the actions and behaviour of individuals and society in general, whether or not they personally use the Internet as a communications medium.

Various factors influence trust, or the lack of it. Appearance, modes of speech, ways of dressing, language, membership of a given institution or organization, behaviour patterns, liability and so on are all factors which create trust and influence our expectation of receiving a positive response to our signals.

This chapter appears in the book, Electronic Government: Design, Applications and Management by Ake Gronlund.

The Internet and Solutions to the Problem of Trust: The Current Situation

Let us begin by reminding ourselves that the attitudes on which trust is based cannot be brought to bear when the Internet is the communication system used. Although the Internet allows us to establish long-distance relationships with other people, the anonymity of the medium, and our ignorance of the nature and lifestyles of our interlocutors, diminish the trust initially generated by the fact of making instant online contact. This limitation is aggravated by the consideration that neither Internet communications channels nor the intermediaries involved are secure. Thus, we have no guarantee as to the identity of our interlocutors, the integrity of the messages sent and received over the Internet or the confidentiality and secrecy of communications.

Trust is therefore a far-reaching problem for the Internet, and this has stimulated efforts to develop solutions. These may be no more than attempts to patch up the situation described, though considerable work has also gone into resolving these difficulties more completely, as we shall see below.

Some of the proposed partial solutions developed in the field of technology are summarized in a special issue on the question of Internet trust technologies published in *Communications*, The *Journal of the ACM* (December 2000.)[1] Some of these solutions concentrate directly on basic issues such as the diagnosis of trust mechanisms in social relationships, which are involved in the functioning of the Internet and how they affect systems designers, Web pages and Internet access providers.[2] Others propose the use of socially established trust solutions on the Internet—for instance, references to the satisfaction of past customers with the goods and services offered by e-businesses, or to conventional trust providers such as professional organizations, which may provide opinions on products, as well as clear descriptions of a Web site's privacy policy or details of the obligations of buyers and sellers entering into a transaction.[3] Yet others rely on the design of interfaces allowing the expression or representation of important attributes for the creation of trust.[4] There are also those who consider that the Internet has not changed habits already acquired by our society through the use of other communications technologies such as television.[5]

Surprisingly, the proposals put forward in this chapter hardly mention one alternative for guaranteeing trust in communications which institutions, companies, associations and government have all taken up with increasing enthusiasm. This solution is based on promoting the general implementation and use of public key encryption techniques. These mechanisms have been accepted both legally and technically as a method of safeguarding both trust and other principles involved in Internet use, including the basic weaknesses relating to identity, integrity and confidentiality of messages discussed above.

This is the subject of this chapter, which will limit references to trust in the use of the Internet to the field which has come to be known as electronic government to distinguish it from e-commerce. The following paragraphs briefly outline the main differences between these two phenomena.

The use of Internet technology in e-commerce and e-Government is often considered to be a point in common. It would therefore seem that an explanation referring to the features and content of the Internet is sufficient to present the characteristics of both e-commerce and e-Government. This places the specific details associated with the two phenomena in the background, however.